

On free political discussion and free political education

“A more practical proposal is to help to change the culture of the domestic society enough so that what should be now done could at least be made a subject of discussion”

(Google ZNet, Noam. Chomsky to Albert, December 27 2006)

“...children do have to be prepared for the economic world--but the invasion of the public school by mercantile values has deeply demoralized teachers. I've been in classrooms where the teacher has to write a so-called mission statement that says, “The mission of this school is to sharpen the competitive edge of America in the global marketplace.”

(Google “ZNet, Jonathan Kozol and Mathew Fishbane to Salon September 1, 2007 , Letters to a young teacher)

“You want to rule? Address yourself to the stupid. They're the majority...I would never entrust my education to the state”
Mark Twain

“Dare to take your ideas seriously because it is them that will shape you...Always obey your conscience even when the state allows you not to”
Albert Einstein

“...(*some believe*)... that there is a moral difference between setting out to destroy as many civilians as possible and killing civilians unintentionally and reluctantly in pursuit of a military objective... Evidently, a crucial case is omitted, which is far more depraved than massacring civilians intentionally. Namely, knowing that you are massacring them but not doing so intentionally because you don't regard them as worthy of concern. That is, you don't even care enough about them to intend to kill them. Thus when I walk down the street, if I stop to think about it I know I'll probably kill lots of ants, but I don't intend to kill them, because in my mind they do not even rise to the level where it matters. There are many such examples. To take one of the very minor ones, when Clinton bombed ...the al-Shifa pharmaceutical facility in Sudan, he and the other perpetrators surely knew that the bombing would kill civilians (tens of thousands, apparently). But Clinton and associates did not intend to kill them... because by the standards of Western liberal humanitarian racism, they are no more significant than ants. Same in the case of tens of millions of others.”

(Google Chomsky's Znet Blog, Samantha Power, Bush & Terrorism, July 31 2007)

“...This is not a prophecy: it is a factual description of what is already happening before our eyes, with murderous confrontations and infantile tantrums taking the place of rational demands and cooperative efforts. Yes: the physical structure of the power system was never more closely articulated: but its human supports were never more frail, more morally indecisive, more vulnerable to attack. How long , those who are now awake must ask themselves, how long can the physical structure of an advanced technology hold together when all its human foundations are crumbling away? All this has happened so suddenly that many people are hardly aware that it has happened at all: yet during the last generation the very bottom has dropped out of our life; the human institutions and moral convictions that have taken thousands of years to achieve even a minimal efficacy have disappeared before our eyes: so completely that the next generation will scarcely believe they ever existed”

Lewis Mumford (in Vietnam years)

“...-But, in this case, the results of the Army Research Office's mission statement in harvesting scholarly work for better weapons design, it's professors, scholars, researchers, scientific designers, etc., who have these choices to focus serious intellectual effort and to be so used for such ends, and who aren't acting necessarily from direct orders but are acting more out of freewill.

-It's freewill, but don't forget that there's a general intellectual culture that raises no objection to this. Let's take the Iraq war. There's libraries of material arguing about the war, debating it, asking ‘What should we do?’, this and that, and the other thing. Now, try to find a sentence somewhere that says that ‘carrying out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime, which differs from other war crimes in that it

encompasses all the evil that follows' (paraphrasing from Nuremberg). Try to find that somewhere. —I mean, you can find it. I've written about it, and you can find a couple other dozen people who have written about it in the world. But is it part of the intellectual culture? Can you find it in a newspaper, or in a journal; in Congress; any public discourse; anything that's part of the general exchange of knowledge and ideas? I mean, do students study it in school? Do they have courses where they teach students that 'to carry out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows'? So, for example, if sectarian warfare is a horrible atrocity, as it is, who's responsible? By the principles of Nuremberg, Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rice—they're responsible for sectarian warfare because they carried out the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows. Try and find somebody who points that out. You can't. Because our dominant intellectual culture accepts as legitimate our crushing anybody we like. And take Iran. Both political parties—and practically the whole press—accept it as legitimate and, in fact, honorable, that 'all options are on the table', presumably including nuclear weapons, to quote Hilary Clinton and everyone else. 'All options are on the table' means we threaten war. Well, there's something called the U.N. Charter, which outlaws 'the threat or use of force' in international affairs. Does anybody care? Actually, I saw one op-ed somewhere by Ray Takeyh, an Iran specialist close to the government, who pointed out that threats are serious violations of international law. But that's so rare that when you find it it's like finding a diamond in a pile of hay or something. It's not part of the culture. We're allowed to threaten anyone we want—and to attack anyone we want. And, when a person grows up and acts in a culture like that, they're culpable in a sense, but the culpability is much broader. I was just reading a couple days ago a review of a new book by Steven Miles, a medical doctor and bioethicist, who ran through 35,000 pages of documents he got from the Freedom of Information Act on the torture in Abu Ghraib. And the question that concerned him is, 'What were the doctors doing during all of this?' All through those torture sessions there were doctors, nurses, behavioral scientists and others who were organizing them. What were they doing when this torture was going on? Well, you go through the detailed record and it turns out that they were designing and improving it. Just like Nazi doctors. Robert Jay Lifton did a big study on Nazi doctors. He points out in connection with the Nazi doctors that, in a way, it's not those individual doctors who had the final guilt, it was a culture and a society which accepted torture and criminal activities as legitimate. The same is true with the tortures at Abu Ghraib. I mean, just to focus on them as if they're somehow terrible people is just a serious mistake. They're coming out of a culture that regards this as legitimate. Maybe there are some excesses you don't really do but torture in interrogation is considered legitimate. There's a big debate now on, 'Who's an enemy combatant?'; a big technical debate. Suppose we invade another country and we capture somebody who's defending the country against our invasion: what do you mean to call them an 'enemy combatant'? If some country invaded the United States and let's say you were captured throwing a rock at one of the soldiers, would it be legitimate to send you to the equivalent of Guantanamo, and then have a debate about whether you're a 'lawful' or 'unlawful' combatant? The whole discussion is kind of, like, off in outer space somewhere. But, in a culture which accepts that we own and rule the world, it's reasonable. But, also, we should go back to the roots of the intellectual or moral culture, not just to the individuals directly involved.

-As mentioned before, whether students are taught serious moral principles: At my school, the University of Arizona, there are courses in bioethics—required ones, in fact, to hard scientific undergraduates (I took one, out of interest)—which mostly just discuss scenarios in terms of 'slippery slopes' and hypothetical questions within certain bounds, and still none at all in the social sciences or humanities. Do you think there should be? Would that be beneficial?

-If they were honest, yes. If they're honest they'd be talking about what we're talking about, and doing case studies. There's no point pontificating about high minded principles. That's easy. Nazi doctors could do that, too. Let's take a look at the cases and ask how the principles apply—to Vietnam; to El Salvador; to Iraq; to Palestine—just run through the cases and see how the principles apply to our own actions. That's what is of prime importance, and what is least discussed.

-As a note to end on, there seems to be some very serious aberrations and defects in our society and our level of culture. How, in your view, might they be corrected and a new level of culture be established, say, one in which torture isn't accepted? (After all, slavery and child labor were each accepted for a long period of time and now are not.)

-Your examples give the answer to the question, the only answer that has ever been known. Slavery and child labor didn't become unacceptable by magic. It took hard, dedicated, courageous work by lots of people. The same is true of torture, which was once completely routine. If I remember correctly, the renowned Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie wrote somewhere that prisons began to proliferate in

Norway in the early 19th century. They weren't much needed before, when the punishment for robbery could be driving a stake through the hand of the accused. Now it's perhaps the most civilized country on earth. There has been a gradual codification of constraints against torture, and they have had some effect, though only limited, even before the Bush regression to savagery. Alfred McCoy's work reviews that ugly history. Still, there is improvement, and there can be more if enough people are willing to undertake the efforts that led to large-scale rejection of slavery and child labor—still far from complete.....

-I think at this point it may do well for us to go over a bit the beginnings and evolution of the ideological currents which now prevail throughout modern social intellectual life in the U.S. Essentially, from where may we trace the development of this strong coterie of technical experts in the schools, and elsewhere, sometimes having been referred to as a 'bought' or 'secular priesthood'?...(And) given the, albeit, self-proclaimed notion that this new class is entitled to decision-making, how close are they to actual policy, then?

-...(And) my feeling is that they're nowhere near as powerful as they think they are. So, when, say, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the technocratic elite which is taking over the running of society—or when McNamara wrote about it, or others—there's a lot of illusion there. Meaning, they can gain positions of authority and decision-making when they act in the interests of those who really own and run the society. You can have people that are just as competent, or more competent, and who have conceptions of social and economic order that run counter to, say, corporate power, and they're not going to be in the planning sectors. So, to get into those planning sectors you first of all have to conform to the interests of the real concentrations of power. And, again, there are a lot of illusions about this—in the media, too. Tom Wicker is a famous example, one of the 'left commentators' of the New York Times. He would get very angry when critics would tell him he's conforming to power interests and that he's keeping within the doctrinal framework of the media, which goes back to their corporate structure and so on. And he would answer, very angrily—and correctly—that nobody tells him what to say. He writes anything he wants,—which is absolutely true. But if he wasn't writing the things he did he wouldn't have a column in the New York Times. That's the kind of thing that is very hard to perceive. People do not want—or often are not able—to perceive that they are conforming to external authority. They feel themselves to be very free—and indeed they are—as long as they conform. But power lies elsewhere. That's as old as history in the modern period. It's often very explicit. Adam Smith, for example, discussing England, quite interestingly pointed out that the merchants and manufacturers—the economic forces of his day—are the 'principal architects of policy', and they make sure that their own interests are 'most peculiarly attended to', no matter how grievous the effect on others, including the people in England. And that's a good principle of statecraft, and social and economic planning, which runs pretty much to the present. When you get people with management and decision-making skills, they can enter into that system and they can make the actual decisions—within a framework that's set within the real concentrations of power. And now it's not the merchants and manufacturers of Adam Smith's day, it's the multinational corporations, financial institutions, and so on. But, stray too far beyond their concerns and you won't be the decision-maker. It's not a mechanical phenomenon, but it's overwhelmingly true that the people who make it to decision-making positions (that is, what they think of as decision-making positions) are those who conform to the basic framework of the people who fundamentally own and run the society. That's why you have a certain choice of technocratic managers and not some other choice of people equally or better capable of carrying out policies but have different ideas.....

-How crucial is it, in your view, that students particularly consider and understand...the function in society of the highly technocratic social order of the academic community?

-How important it is, to an individual, depends on what that individual's goals in life are. If the goals are to enrich yourself, gain privilege, do technically interesting work—in brief, if the goals are self-satisfaction—then these questions are of no particular relevance. If you care about the consequences of your actions, what's happening in the world, what the future will be like for your grandchildren and so on, then they're very crucial. So, it's a question of what choices people make.

-What makes students a natural audience to speak to? And do you think it's worth 'speaking truth' to the professional scholarship as well or differently? Are there any short- or long-term possibilities here?

-I'm always uneasy about the concept of "speaking truth," as if we somehow know the truth and only have to enlighten others who have not risen to our elevated level. The search for truth is a cooperative, unending endeavor. We can, and should, engage in it to the extent we can and encourage others to do so as well, seeking to free ourselves from constraints imposed by coercive institutions, dogma, irrationality, excessive conformity and lack of initiative and imagination, and numerous other obstacles. As for possibilities, they

are limited only by will and choice. Students are at a stage of their lives where these choices are most urgent and compelling, and when they also enjoy unusual, if not unique, freedom and opportunity to explore the choices available, to evaluate them, and to pursue them.

-In your view, what is it about the privileges within university education and academic scholarship which as you assert in some of the things you've written, correlate with them a greater responsibility for catastrophic atrocities such as the Vietnam War or those in the Middle East in which the United States is now involved?

-Well, there are really some moral truisms. One of them is that opportunity confers responsibility. If you have very limited opportunities, then you have limited responsibility for what you do. If you have substantial opportunity you have greater responsibility for what you do. I mean, that's kind of elementary, I don't know how it can be discussed. And the people who we call 'intellectuals' are just those who happen to have substantial opportunity. They have privilege, they have resources, they have training. In our society, they have a high degree of freedom—not a hundred percent, but quite a lot—and that gives them a range of choices that they can pursue with a fair degree of freedom, and that hence simply confers responsibility for the predictable consequences of the choices they make..."

(About the skipped parts (mainly discussing whether the Nuremberg judges applied double standards like today's) google "ZNet, Chomsky, Schivone, War and responsibility, August 16 2007"

"...they are the prey of compulsive fears and corrupt fantasies whose ultimate outcome may be universal annihilation and extermination; and the more they devote themselves to adapting their urban environment to this possibility [of nuclear war], the more surely they will bring on the unrestricted collective genocide many of them have justified in their minds as the necessary price of preserving "freedom" and "civilization". The masters of the underground citadel are committed to a "war" they cannot bring to an end, with weapons they cannot control, for purposes that they cannot accomplish. The [*"nuke protected"*] underground city threatens in consequence to become the burial crypt of our incinerated civilization. Modern man's only alternative is to emerge once more into the light and have the courage, not to escape to the moon, but to return to his human center—and to master the bellicose compulsions and irrationalities he shares with his rulers and mentors. He must not only unlearn the art of war, but acquire and master, as never before, the arts of life...For those of us who have thrown off the myth of the machine, the next move is ours: for the gates of the technocratic prison will open automatically, despite their rusty ancient hinges, as soon as we choose to walk out... We know now, as never before, that undisclosed potentialities of life reach far beyond the proud algebras of contemporary science; and their promises for the further transformations of man are as enchanting as they are inexhaustible...Man grows in the image of his gods, and up to the measure they have set. The mixture of divinity, power and personality that brought the ancient city into existence must be weighed out anew in terms of the ideology and the culture of our own time, and poured into fresh civic, regional, and planetary molds. In order to defeat the insensate forces that now threaten civilization from within, we must transcend the original frustrations and negations that have dogged the city throughout its history. Otherwise the sterile gods of power, unrestrained by organic limits or human goals, will remake man in their own faceless image and bring human history to an end"

Lewis Mumford (in cold war years)

"...In the face of the threat that history may roll back to the abyss of the Arrhythmic, the Amorphous and the preontological, nobody can avoid assuming responsibility. Those poets who feel born on the pulse of the Universe have the additional responsibility to make Poetry take on her own horrible responsibility of breaking the causal deterministic sequence of events after first coming to know her own mystical origin in the infinity, the inner freedom and the biological God deep inside us, and from there draw strength to lift again the universal symbols of cosmic continuity of man with his similars and with the Universe, the symbols that are able to disperse his historical pseudoproblems and deliver man from all arbitrary myths of our age, scientific myths, mechanical myths, political myths, economic myths, artificial artistic myths, etc etc—that, through also exerting immense violence, have displaced man from the center of his responsibly creative self where is found the source of his freedom and have led to the dismemberment of the erotic core of man's experience of the world and have disintegrated society into heaps of unburied corpses—and place him again at the center of Life and of duration from where the world, placed at the center of our consciousness and not at the periphery, will bring down walls and open up horizons, not altogether imaginary, that have been waiting, since the beginning of time, to line up in perspective in front of us"

Angelos Sikelianos (a little before the 2nd World War)

“...If we consider earth as a big living organism and the human species as a minimal part of its cells, we will realize, with fright, that the capitalist system has mutated the humans into cancer cells that are recklessly seesawing the branch on which we all are sitting. The prudent do realize that the planet is ailing. The earth is ill! Gravely ill! At one moment it’s burning with fever, at the next moment it is run through by shivers. Half of the earth is burning with wildfires, the other half is drowning with floods. The ones responsible, enjoying the cool of their air-conditioning, are talking about remorseless arsonists, about unheard of heat waves, about extreme phenomena of climate change, successfully faced due to timely actions of the governments. I close my eyes and dig into my mind to remember some of the coordinated actions of the governments having passed over my neck. Here they are:...(1...2...3...4...5...6...)... Maybe there’s more, OK. Imagine yourself a fireman looking, amidst so many fires and so many coordinated actions, to also locate and arrest the arsonists. Little mother earth, forgive us. I wish you come out a winner out of all this ugly adventure of your health. I wish to be sure that your chemotherapy will be successful. It’s only that, well, it’s only that I won’t be alive to see your lovely little hair grow back up and cover the sores we opened on your body”

Lazaros Gakilazos, officer of a fire brigade,
in a letter to a newspaper he wrote after one of the last few months’ wildfires.

“As of today, this resurgence of reproductive activity might be partly explained as a deep instinctual answer to the premature death of scores of millions of people throughout the planet. But even more possibly, it may be the unconscious reaction to the likelihood of an annihilating outburst of nuclear genocide on a planetary scale. As such, every new baby is a blind desperate vote for survival: people who find themselves unable to register an effective political protest against extermination do so by a biological act. In countries where state aid is lacking, young parents often accept a severe privation of goods and an absence of leisure, rather than accept privation of life by forgoing children...”

Lewis Mumford (a little after the 2nd World War)

(The Lewis Mumford excerpts were, mainly, from his “The City in History” and “The Myth of the Machine”, the Angelos Sikelianos excerpts were from his Prologue to his “Lyric Life”)



Thought forum

*“We should all try to live within our means
even if we have to borrow to do so”
(Borrowed from a borrower who
borrowed it from....from...
from...)*

Right now humanity finds itself on a race between universal education and universal destruction
Lewis Mumford (in the early '50s)